The Search for Heartwood

A Timeless Parable on the True Goal of the Spiritual Life

Based on the *Mahāsāropamasutta*
(The Longer Simile of the Heartwood)

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The journey begins with a fundamental recognition.

A gentleman goes forth, ‘thinking, “I’m swamped by rebirth, old age, and death; by sorrow, lamentation, pain, sadness, and distress. I’m swamped by suffering, mired in suffering. Hopefully I can make an end to this entire mass of suffering.”’

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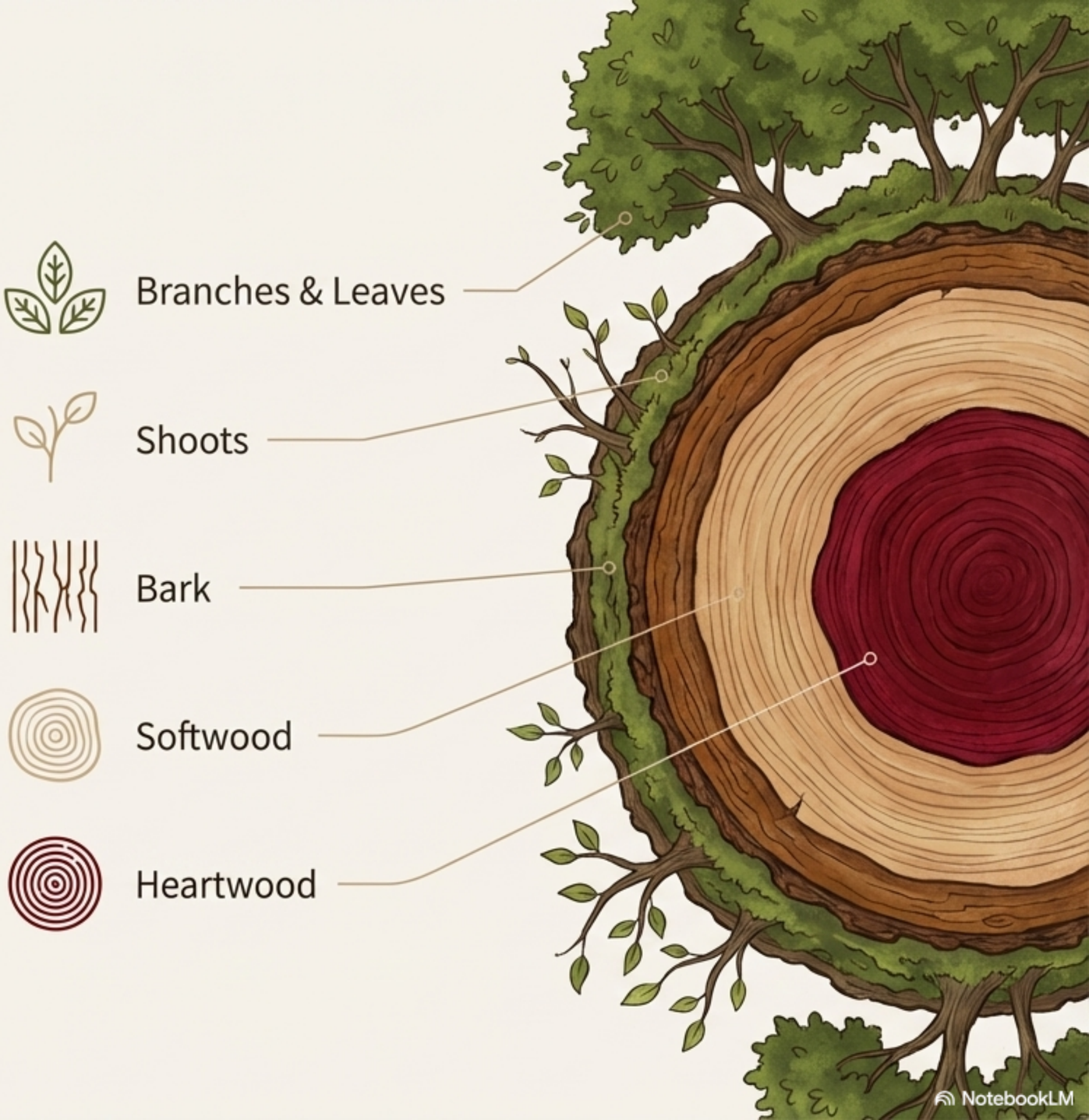
The Spiritual Life is Like a Great Tree

‘Suppose there was a person in need of heartwood. And while wandering in search of heartwood he’d come across a large tree standing with heartwood.’

The spiritual path has many layers of attainment, but only one is the essential, unshakable core—the heartwood.



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Mistaking the Branches & Leaves for Heartwood

Spiritual Attainment: The practitioner generates ‘possessions, honor, and popularity.’

The Pitfall: They’re happy with that, and they’ve got all they wished for. And they glorify themselves and put others down because of that... And so they become indulgent and fall into negligence.

The Simile: This is like cutting off the branches and leaves, imagining them to be the goal. ‘Whatever he needs to make from heartwood, he won’t succeed.’

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Mistaking the Shoots for Heartwood

Spiritual Attainment: Being diligent, they achieve ‘accomplishment in ethics.’

The Pitfall: They’re happy with that, and they’ve got all they wished for. And they glorify themselves and put others down… ‘I’m the one who is ethical… These other mendicants are unethical.’

The Simile: This is like passing over the bark and cutting off the shoots, imagining them to be the goal. ‘He won’t succeed.’

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Mistaking the Bark for Heartwood

Spiritual Attainment: Moving beyond ethics, they achieve ‘accomplishment in immersion’ (a unified mind).

The Pitfall: They’re happy with that… And they glorify themselves and put others down… ‘I’m the one with immersion… These other mendicants have straying minds.”

The Simile: This is like cutting off the protective bark, imagining it to be the strong inner core. “He won’t succeed.”

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Mistaking the Softwood for Heartwood

Spiritual Attainment: They achieve ‘knowledge and vision.’

The Pitfall: They’re happy with that... And they glorify themselves and put others down... “I’m the one who meditates knowing and seeing. These other mendicants meditate without knowing and seeing.”

The Simile: This is like cutting out the softwood—the layer just before the core—and leaving with it, believing the task is complete. “He won’t succeed.”

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The Path to the Core is Paved with Diligence, Not Complacency

The successful practitioner also achieves possessions, **ethics, immersion**, and **knowledge** & **vision**.

The Crucial Difference

At each stage, they are ‘happy with that, “**but they haven’t got all they wished for.**”

Key Behavior: “They don’t glorify themselves and put others down on account of that. Nor do they become indulgent and fall into negligence.” They remain diligent.

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Reaching the Heartwood: Irreversible Freedom

The Final Attainment:
Being diligent, they achieve irreversible freedom.

The Successful Simile:
A person with clear eyes would say:
“This gentleman knows what heartwood... [is].
That’s why he cut out just the heartwood and left knowing it was heartwood. Whatever he needs to make from heartwood, he will succeed.’”

The Outcome:
It’s impossible for that mendicant to fall away from that irreversible freedom.

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And so, mendicants, this spiritual life is not lived for the sake of possessions, honor, and popularity, or for accomplishment in ethics, or for accomplishment in immersion, or for knowledge and vision.

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It is this

unshakable freedom of heart

that is the goal of the spiritual life, the core and the final end.”

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The Path and its Pitfalls at a Glance

Metaphor (The Tree)	Spiritual Attainment	The Pitfall of Mistaking it for the Goal
Branches & Leaves	Possessions, Honor, Popularity	Self-glorification & Negligence
Shoots	Accomplishment in Ethics	Self-glorification & Negligence
Bark	Accomplishment in Immersion	Self-glorification & Negligence
Softwood	Knowledge & Vision	Self-glorification & Negligence
Heartwood	**Unshakable Freedom of Heart**	The Core & Final End

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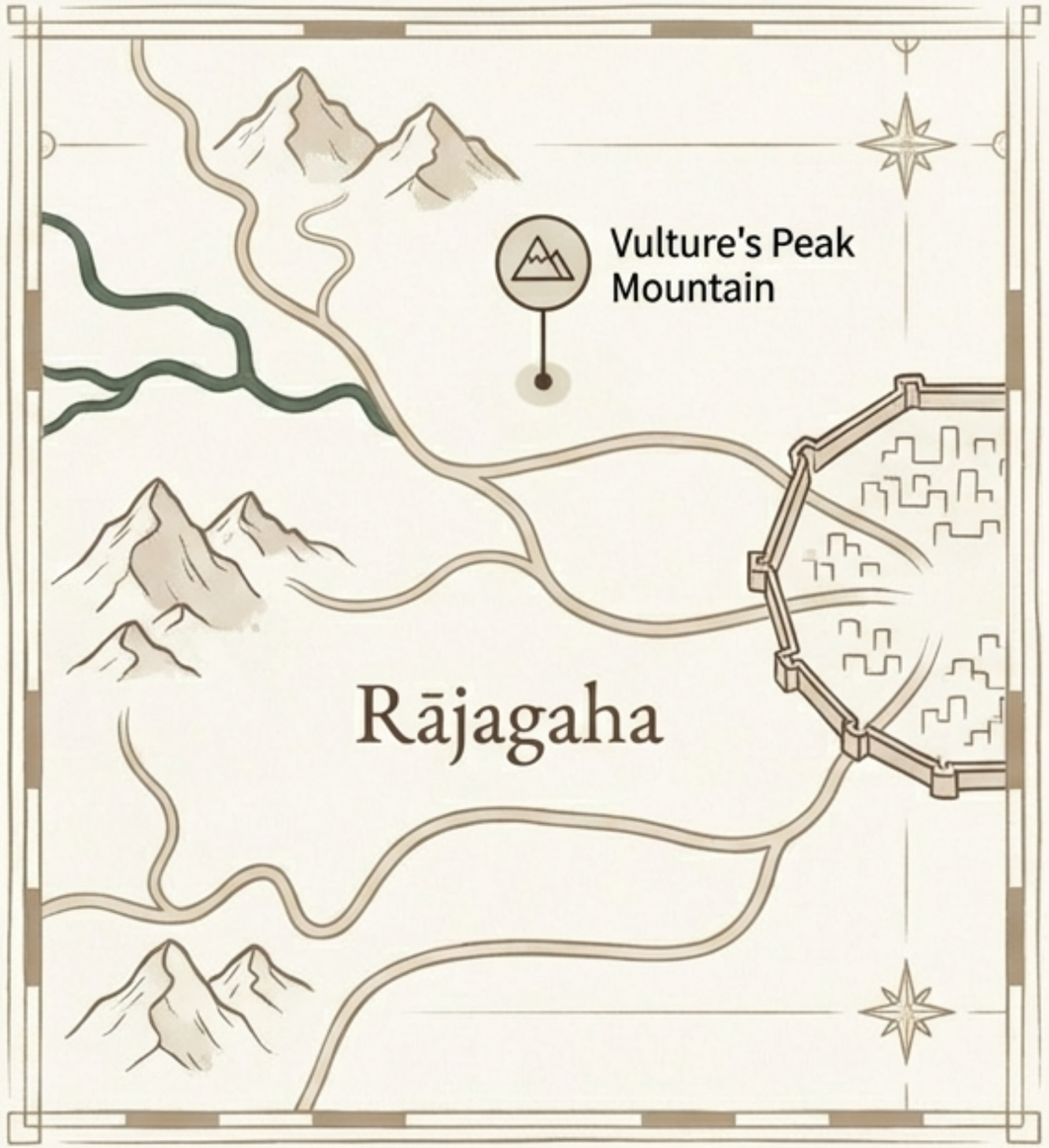
The Context of the Teaching

This parable, from the *Mahāsāropamasutta*, was delivered by the Buddha shortly after his cousin, Devadatta, had left the community.

Insight

‘The Buddha spoke to the mendicants about Devadatta,’ whose own spiritual journey was marked by a quest for honor and popularity—a living example of one who ‘grabbed the branches and leaves… and stopped short.’



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The Enduring Simile

The search for heartwood is a timeless map of the inner journey. It reminds us to continually ask if we are satisfied with the outer layers of our practice, or if we are still pressing on toward the unshakable core.

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